

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
October 27, 2005

SONOMA LAND TRUST INVASIVE PLANT MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

File No. 05-060
Project Manager: Maxene Spellman

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$50,000 to the Sonoma Land Trust (SLT) to create a comprehensive invasive plant management program for the protection of native plant and animal species, habitat restoration and agricultural preservation on approximately 3,775 acres of open space and agricultural lands owned by SLT.

LOCATION: The invasive plant management program will encompass six properties owned by SLT located throughout unincorporated Sonoma County (Exhibit).

PROGRAM CATEGORY: San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Property Locations in Sonoma County

Exhibit 2: Site Maps of Six Sites Targeted for Management

Exhibit 3: Letters of Support

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31160 through 31164 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed fifty thousand dollars (\$50,000) to the Sonoma Land Trust (SLT) for the development of an invasive plant management program for the protection of native plant and animal species, habitat restoration and agricultural preservation on approximately 3,775 acres of open space and agricultural lands owned by SLT in Sonoma County, subject to the condition that prior to disbursement of Conservancy funds, SLT shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy a detailed work program, schedule, and budget and the names and qualifications of any contractors to be employed in carrying out the project .”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program, Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code Sections 31160-31164.
 2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
 3. The Sonoma Land Trust is a nonprofit organization existing under Section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, and whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.”
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PROJECT SUMMARY:

The proposed project would allow the Sonoma Land Trust (SLT) to utilize technical and stewardship staff, and to contract for assistance to conduct property assessments, in order to develop a comprehensive invasive plant management program for the protection of 3,775 acres, consisting of six of SLT’s key conservation lands. (See Exhibit 1, Property Locations and Exhibit 2, Site Maps). These properties, located in the Russian River watershed and Sonoma Baylands, are threatened with habitat degradation due to the spread of invasive plants, yet contain a wealth of sensitive wildlife habitats, and, on most properties, agricultural operations. Creating a permanent program to control the invasive weeds will protect the natural landscapes and viable agricultural operations on these properties and prevent the spread of exotics to adjacent properties.

SLT, a 501(c)(3) non profit organization dedication to open land conservation, strives to develop model land management practices to protect these high value conservation lands. For example, on its recently acquired 2,300-acre Sonoma Bayland property SLT conducted aerial spraying to address an infestation of invasive thistle, achieving some success in reducing the infestation. SLT recognizes that to successfully address the growing problem of spreading invasive plant species at these and other important sites, it must undertake a comprehensive assessment and adopt a long-term strategy for removal of harmful exotics. Without an informed and coordinated approach, efforts to control the spread of invasive plants would otherwise occur in a piecemeal fashion resulting in re-infestations. SLT proposes to create a comprehensive management approach as follows:

- Survey and identify invasive plants on key SLT properties;
- Assess and document the occurrences by location, size, health and distribution;
- Use the surveys and documentation to complete site-specific management plans, including strategies, alternative treatment methods for effective control, and monitoring protocols; and
- Utilize and expand SLT’s existing volunteer stewardship program into a strategy for permanently managing invasive species.

Prior to implementation of the plant management program, SLT also expects to undertake a demonstration project, using alternative management tools on one of the six sites. This demonstration project would not, however, utilize Conservancy funding, but will help make the

future implementation of the overall management program more effective. Once the planning and demonstration project are completed, SLT is committed to implementing the invasive plant management program utilizing permanent volunteer stewardship and other resources necessary to carry it out on all six sites.

Site Description of the Six Properties Proposed for the Invasive Plant Management Program:

- North Point Joint Venture/Dickson Ranch – This Sonoma Bayland property consists of 2300 acres and has a significant number of rare and endangered plants and animals associated with the property's seasonal wetlands and vernal pools. The upland portion of the property is leased for livestock grazing. Invasions of artichoke thistle, yellow star thistle and purple star thistle threaten to out compete the native plants and impede successful agricultural operations. Over the past ten years the agricultural tenants have treated the thistle with some success through mowing, application of herbicides and hand pulling, yet the invasive thistle returns. As mentioned, SLT completed aerial spraying this year to reduce the infestation. The proposed comprehensive approach will address the most effective combination of methodologies for treatment and integrate a volunteer driven stewardship to permanently address the invasive plant problem on this site.
- North Parcel – This 300-acre property, which abuts the North Point Joint Venture/Dickson Ranch to the east, was formerly in oat hay production. SLT recently completed the construction of seasonal wetlands on North Parcel, and is managing it to enhance migratory and resident bird habitat. The property is host to a recent explosion of the invasive Australian bent grass. If left uncontrolled it could significantly degrade the restored habitat and spread off-site to North Point Joint Venture/Dickson Ranch.
- Leonard Ranch – This 250-acre property borders the North Parcel property to the southwest. It supports oat hay production. Large infestations of thistle, radish and other common weeds occur on a levee bordering the farmed area. Invasive pepper weed also occurs here. The proposed invasive plant management program is needed to assess the extent of these invasions and develop a plan to prevent the infestations from spreading to surrounding conservation properties.
- Glen Oaks Ranch – This 250-acre historic ranch is located in Sonoma Valley. The ranch includes historic buildings, vineyards, upland habitat, and riparian habitat along Stuart Creek. Stuart Creek is an important tributary to Sonoma Creek, which is identified as having regional significance in the Conservancy's Strategic Plan. Both creeks provide spawning habitat for steelhead trout and host a viable population of resident rainbow trout. Volunteers completed riparian plantings along Stuart Creek, but small infestations of invasive Spanish broom, Himalayan blackberry and periwinkle occur on the property's riparian areas. SLT has the opportunity to eradicate these limited infestations before they become a bigger threat to this sensitive riparian habitat, and the volunteer effort at the Ranch make it a site well suited for successful stewardship once the an invasive plant management program is developed. The proposed program would also address the

removal of dead non-native pine trees that pose a fire hazard in the upland areas of the property.

- **Laufenburg Ranch** – A portion of this 175-acre property, located in eastern Sonoma County, operates as an organic farm where tomatoes, peppers and pears are grown. Mixed woodland occurs on its hillsides, and riparian habitat exists along Bidwell Creek. The creek, which runs through the property, provides habitat to federally listed California fresh water shrimp, coho salmon, and steelhead trout. SLT's volunteer program is responsible for planting over 1,000 native trees and shrubs to expand and enhance the riparian habitat. However, invasive plant species that threaten the integrity of the riparian and woodland habitats include French broom, Himalaya blackberry, and Italian thistle. An invasive plant management program is needed to control or eradicate these invasive plants. Implementation of it would also benefit from the ongoing volunteer efforts at Laufenburg Ranch.
- **Little Black Mountain** – This 500-acre property, at the top of Black Mountain in the more remote part of western Sonoma County, contains the headwaters of several creeks which drain into Austin Creek and the lower Russian River. Forests, shrubs and grasslands grow on the property's volcanic soils. This vegetation is going through natural habitat succession as the property recovers from a catastrophic fire that took place in the late 1970's. Non-native grasses, star thistle and Italian thistle are colonizing among the significant stands of native grasses and shrubs. The development of an invasive plant management program would allow SLT to assist in the recovery of the site's native plant diversity.

Project History: In partnership with the Conservancy and others, SLT has built an impressive track record for acquiring, restoring, and managing important Sonoma baylands, uplands and coastal properties for wildlife protection and agricultural preservation. Two of the six key conservation properties identified for invasive plant management, North Parcel and adjoining Leonard Ranch, were purchased with Conservancy assistance in the 1980's. In August 2000, and in January 2003, the Conservancy approved funding for SLT to restore North Parcel to seasonal wetlands on land previously farmed to increase winter and spring habitat for shorebirds and waterfowl, while ensuring the preservation of oat hay production on the Leonard Ranch property. Recently, SLT successfully completed this project.

Another important SLT property targeted for invasive plant management is the North Point Joint Venture property. The Conservancy was among many contributors that assisted SLT to purchase North Point Joint Venture in January 2005. This expansive property consists of valuable wetland and upland habitats and limited cattle grazing in the upland portion. The purchase of North Point Joint Venture greatly increased the area's contiguous protected land that now includes the adjacent North Parcel/Leonard Ranch to the east, and the SLT's Dickson Ranch and United States Fish and Wildlife Service's San Pablo Bay National Wildlife Refuge to the west. The acquisitions of the North Point Joint Venture and Dickson Ranch represented a major victory for ensuring long-term connectivity of key conservation areas and thus made an enormous contribution to the health of the Bay ecosystem. The project recommended for approval will assist SLT protect the integrity of that ecosystem by developing a comprehensive invasive plant

management program for these bayland sites as well as for other sensitive yet impacted properties described under “Site Description”.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$ 50,000
Sonoma Land Trust	<u>50,000</u>
Total Project Cost	\$100,000

The Conservancy’s contribution of \$50,000 is expected to come from its FY 02/03 appropriation from the “California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks and Coastal Protection Act of 2002” (Proposition 40) for the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program. This funding source may be used for the deployment and development (including rehabilitation, restoration, and enhancement) of land and water resources in accordance with the provisions of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Section 5096.650(b)). The proposed project serves to assist in the development of an invasive plant management program designed to protect and restore land and water resources. In addition, as discussed below, the project is consistent with Chapter 4.5 of Division 21.

Proposition 40 also requires the Conservancy to give priority to grant projects with matching funds (§5096.651). The Sonoma Land Trust will match Conservancy funding for program planning on a one to one ratio, and is committed to implementing the invasive plant management program through its existing volunteer program. SLT is requesting grants to match the Conservancy funds from the Mary A. Crocker Foundation and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, both of which have expressed interest. SLT is committed to draw from its general operating funds in an amount necessary to complete the proposed project should they not receive any or all of this outside matching funding.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project would advance the purposes of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program, Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31160-31164). The project is consistent with §31162, which authorizes the Conservancy to undertake projects and award grants in the nine-county Bay Area to public and private agencies and organizations to help achieve the following goals: “protect, restore, and enhance natural habitats and connecting corridors, watersheds, scenic areas, and other open-space resources of regional importance and . . . promote, assist, and enhance projects that provide open space and natural areas that are accessible to urban populations for recreational or educational purposes”. The management efforts funded by the proposed project will further these goals with respect to the targeted conservation properties throughout Sonoma County, which together consist of a natural and open space resource of great significance to the Bay Area region.

The proposed project is also consistent with §31163, which requires the Conservancy to “cooperate with . . . nonprofit land trusts, . . . and other interested parties in identifying and adopting long-term resource . . . goals for the San Francisco Bay area.” This project will utilize a

collaborative process that will define long-term restoration management goals regarding the control of invasive plants for the Sonoma Land Trust conservation and agricultural properties.

Finally, this project is appropriate for San Francisco Bay Conservancy Program priority under the criteria of §31163(d), because it is supported by the adopted San Francisco Bay Plan and County regulations concerning control of invasive plant species, serves a regional constituency, can be implemented in a timely way, provides opportunities for resource restoration that could be lost if the project is not quickly implemented, and includes matching funds from other sources of funding.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S
STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):**

San Francisco Bay Program Goal Matrix under Regional Projects identifies Napa Sonoma Marshes as an area of regional significance. The invasive plant management program addresses preservation of wildlife habitats associated with over 2,000 acres of Sonoma bayland properties.

San Francisco Bay Program Goal Matrix under Baylands, Rivers, Wetlands identifies Sonoma Creek as a project area of regional significance. The invasive plant management program will address preservation of Stuart Creek riparian habitat at the Glen Oaks Ranch property. Stuart Creek is an important tributary to Sonoma Creek.

Consistent with **Goal 6, Objective A** of the Conservancy's Strategic Plan, the proposed project is to develop a plan that will help preserve the coastal watershed of the Russian River. The invasive plant management program will address preservation of riparian habitat associated with the headwaters of creeks on the Little Black Mountain property that drain into the lower Russian River.

Consistent with **Goal 10, Objective B** of the Conservancy's Strategic Plan, the proposed project is to develop a plan for removal of invasive plants dispersed over 3,775 acres to help protect an undetermined quantity of riparian habitat, upland habitats, wetlands and watersheds. The proposed plan will result in the identification of areas needing treatment and the quantification of sensitive areas that will benefit.

Consistent with **Goal 12, Objective B** of the Conservancy's Strategic Plan, the proposed project is to develop one plan to assist agricultural interests in complying with best management practices with regards to the removal of invasive plant species. This plan will benefit agricultural operations on at least 3 of the 6 properties targeted.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S
PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** The preservation and restoration of Sonoma County protected lands, including the control of invasive plants, enjoys wide support from federal, state and local agencies, community groups and private citizens. Specifically, the proposed project is supported by United States Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Marine Fisheries Service, the California Department of Fish and Game, the California Native Plant Society, the Sonoma County Agricultural Commissioner's Office, the California Department of Food and Agriculture, the Marin/Sonoma Weed Management Area, and the 1600 individuals and volunteers that make up the membership of SLT. Letters of support are attached as Exhibit 3.
4. **Location:** All properties are located within the jurisdiction of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program and within watersheds that drain to the Bay. See the "Site Description" section above.
5. **Need:** SLT is not able to prepare a comprehensive invasive plant management program for multiple properties without the Conservancy's assistance. Such a program is needed to effectively control invasive weeds before they permanently degrade the natural landscapes, prevent further spread of infestations on and off the targeted properties, and protect the viability of agricultural operations.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The control of invasive species is an issue of statewide concern and national importance. The concern derives from a better understanding of the dire impacts on natural wildlife diversity caused by the spread of invasive plants.

Additional Criteria

7. **Urgency:** Invasive plants continue to spread and often do so rapidly, to replace native species. With the Conservancy's assistance SLT will have the opportunity to address the problem before infestations seriously damage sensitive habitats and spread to neighboring properties. Also, restoration planning is occurring simultaneously for some of the sites which are targeted for the proposed invasive plant management program. Now is the time to address strategies for invasive plant control in coordination with these other planning efforts.
8. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The invasive plant management program will help to resolve issues of habitat preservation and agricultural viability. At the same time the project will strengthen excellent stewardship for managing natural resource and agricultural lands as SLT integrates their ongoing volunteer and educational programs with the proposed project.
9. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above. In addition, the proposed program will leverage existing funding for land management from the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation for the North Point Joint Venture property and from the National Resource Conservation Service Wetland Reserve Program for the North Parcel property.

10. **Readiness:** SLT is ready to begin the preparation of the invasive plant management program immediately.
11. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** “See “Project History” above.”
12. **Return to Conservancy:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
13. **Cooperation:** SLT has a number of public and private partners that cooperate on land management issues and will become involved with the proposed program through technical assistance and/or direct involvement. The Mid-Peninsula Open Space District and the Golden Gate National Recreation Area are providing SLT with advice regarding their successful invasive weed programs. Agricultural tenants are anxious to cooperate. The United States Fish and Wildlife Service San Pablo Bay National Wildlife Refuge and the National Resource Conservation Service will provide technical assistance. Other organizations including LandPaths and Circuit Riders Productions will continue their cooperative relationship with SLT to implement the proposed project.

CONSISTENCY WITH THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY PLAN:

This project is consistent with the San Francisco Bay Plan regarding Policies 5, 6, and 7 under Part III: the Bay as a Resource: Findings and Policies, Tidal Marshes and Tidal Flats. These policies state that restoration should include an analysis of potential invasive species and their control (Policy 5); any habitat restoration project approved by the Bay Conservation and Development Commission should include a program for the monitoring of non-native species and a program for control and eradication of invasive species (Policy 6); and the Commission should continue to support and encourage the expansion of scientific information on the arrival and spread of invasive plants and support regional eradication efforts (Policy 7). The proposed project will analyze the types, locations and strategies for control of invasive plant species on a programmatic level on properties where tidal marsh restoration is proposed or occurring, as well as on sensitive upland properties.

CONSISTENCY WITH APPROVED LOCAL PLANS AND REGULATIONS:

The proposed project is consistent with the County of Sonoma’s Quarantine Regulations that give a priority rating for eradication of specific invasive plants, such as the purple star thistle, that is found on SLT’s agricultural properties and will be addressed under the proposed invasive plant management program.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The preparation of an Invasive Plant Management Program is statutorily exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) under 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15262 in that it involves only planning for possible future actions which have not been approved, adopted, or funded